

# Solutions for Pet Allergies

by Nancy Levenson, Contributor

About a third of Americans who have pet allergies live with at least one cat or dog. Why would they do that to themselves? For some, the benefits of having pets may outweigh the pitfalls of allergies. For others, the allergies trump the pet and, sadly, thousands of animals are surrendered to shelters every day. "The primary reason that people cite for surrendering their pets is allergies," says Brenda Barnette, CEO of the Seattle Humane Society.

If you're allergic and decide to keep your pet, are you signing on for years of misery? Not necessarily. People with allergies can, and often do, live comfortably with their companion animals. Barnette adds: "I know cat owners with severe asthma. They've educated themselves, and now they take a few precautions to ensure that the cats don't interfere with their health. It is possible!"

If you or someone in your family suffers from allergies, increase your chances of pet-owning success by finding out everything you can before saying "farewell" to a furry friend or inviting one into your home. Get started with these quick facts:

- Pet allergies are common. According to the Humane Society, about 15 percent of the population is allergic to dogs or cats.
- Pet allergens are present in animal dander (skin flakes) saliva, and urine. Allergens may become airborne, and the particles are too small to see. Therefore, it's possible to experience allergic reactions without touching an animal.
- Allergic reactions include coughing, itchy and watery eyes, nasal congestion, wheezing, shortness of breath, and skin rashes.
- Although it's possible to build up some resistance to pet allergies, don't count on it. Children are more likely to grow out of an allergy than adults.

## Best Pet Bets

Many people believe that the longer-haired breeds are automatically more allergenic. In fact, it's the dander that has a bigger affect on allergies. And, unfortunately, there's no such thing as a "non-allergenic" animal. However, some cat and dog breeds can cause less of a reaction for allergy sufferers, and those are the ones that are often referred to as "hypo-allergenic." Hypo-allergenic dogs include poodles, schnauzers and Portuguese water dogs (that's the Obama's family dog). As for cats, there are fewer options, but the hairless varieties and the Cornish Rex are potential options for allergy sufferers.

So, how do you choose? The Seattle Humane Society suggests doing this test before adopting an animal: Visit one animal at a time. Have contact with only that animal, and wait thirty minutes. If you are going to have a reaction, it will most likely occur in that timeframe.

## Keeping Allergens at Bay

You can greatly reduce the amount of allergens in your home by taking some of the following steps:

- Limit the number of rooms the animal is allowed in. In particular, do not allow the animal in the bedroom of an allergy sufferer.
- Avoid touching your eyes or face after handling the pet. Wash your hands immediately.
- Reduce or eliminate carpeting, area rugs and fabric draperies in your home. If you have any, clean them often.
- Vacuum/mop floors frequently. Consider a vacuum filter that's made specially to filter pet dander and hair.
- Use a HEPA air cleaner in your home.
- Bathe your pet weekly.
- Use a high-efficiency furnace filter.

## Out of Ideas?

If the above strategies aren't working for you, consider seeking medical attention to get allergy relief. An allergist may

prescribe allergy shots, or suggest over-the-counter medications, such as antihistamines.

Fingers crossed, you and your pet will be able to stay happy and healthy—together!

### ***Nancy Levenson***

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